# Teaching and Training Large English Conversation Classes

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The thought of facing a large conversation class of low-level English proficiency students often causes some unease to even the most experienced teachers. To less experienced teachers, or teachers new to teaching large classes, the reaction is often bewilderment. On the surface, the prospects for achieving any meaningful improvement in the students' conversational skills are directly correlated to class size. When a teacher stands in front of a class of 40 or more students, s/he cannot be blamed for wondering how anything can be accomplished under such seemingly adverse conditions.

There are many reasons behind an initial negative assessment of the situation, and the difficulties associated with large English conversation classes cannot be easily dismissed or underestimated. However, learning objectives can be successfully met with large groups. In this paper, I would like to suggest a teaching strategy, based on the principles of a learner-centered approach to teaching and learner training, which is intended to meet the special needs of both teachers and students in large English conversation classes at the university level in Japan.

## The Problems

Though two classes may share many superficial similarities, they will not necessarily present the same 'challenges' to a teacher. Some-

thing that needs special attention with one group may not be of particular concern with another group. There are, nonetheless, several factors that teachers frequently cite as potential difficulties with large groups:

1. **Mixed proficiency levels.** Since students are not placed in a class on the basis of an English proficiency examination, there can be a range in English ability even in first-year classes which can affect activities and materials selection.
2. **Physical constraints.** A crowded classroom which restricts movement can hinder many activities and limit a teacher's choice of techniques, activities and materials.
3. **Difficulty of establishing relationships between the teacher and students.** Recent trends in teaching methodology emphasize the importance of breaking down the 'social distance' between the teacher and students in order to create a supportive, trustful classroom environment. This process can take quite a long time with large groups.
4. **Discipline.** If discipline is poor, a teacher may not have sufficient personal knowledge of the student(s) to identify possible causes and take appropriate steps to remedy the situation.
5. **Low motivation.** A perennial problem which may not be within a teacher's power to influence. It can stem from many sources, such as a lack of interest in the subject, or a lack of confidence, and may result in withdrawl or discipline problems.

Though a teacher may periodically encounter a group where one or more of the above factors are serious obstacles to instruction, most of the time these problems can eventually be managed satisfactorily. Nevertheless, even a group of 40 or 50 well-motivated students in a conversation class can be very taxing for a teacher. This can be attributed to the very nature of conversation classes and, to a degree, second language learning in general.

Second language learning involves acquisition of knowledge, but an individual's mastery of the knowledge is ultimately judged by the ability to use the knowledge as a tool in communication. This is

especially true in courses where spoken communication is the focus. Although grammatical knowledge, for example, is necessary, it is only one aspect of a complex of factors that makes one a competent speaker. Many of the factors involved in spoken communication are as much skill-based as knowledge-based. Therefore, the most effective means of developing and acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge is through exposure to situations which maximize the opportunities for experimentation, practice and feedback from a teacher. Even if one only considers the organizational and managerial requirements, the task of creating and maintaining the optimal learning environment in conversation classes can be far more demanding and challenging with a class of 50 students than with a class of 15.

## The Learner-Centered Approach

Of course, organizational and managerial decisions are made within the context of a chosen methodology, and large groups compel teachers to make vital methodological decisions. With a small group, a teacher has frequent opportunities for close observation of the students, and rapid response to individual needs. Large classes restrict such intimacy. Furthermore, while a teacher can assume and switch various roles-instructor, participant, evaluator or facilitator-with relative ease in a small group, this is not as feasible with a large group. In short, attempts to apply a 'small group' methodology to a large group are likely to lead to frustration for teachers and students alike.

Viable answers to the special methodological considerations of teaching large groups can be found in the principles of 'the learner-centered (LC) approach', a recent trend in the development and expansion of communicative language teaching. 'The' definition of 'the' learner-centered approach is subject to different interpretations because there are a number of related approaches. Just as Nunan (1987, 12) wrote that "... it is difficult to find approaches which claim not to be communicative!", it is equally "difficult to find approaches

which claim not to be" learner-centered. Nevertheless, learner-centered approaches all seek to increase the 'learner's' (the preferred term to 'student' for some) involvement in his/her learning. Nunan (1989) and Breen (1987), among others, believe that 'involvement' includes not only classroom practices, but also learner input and decision making in course methodology, content and evaluation. However, if one wishes to focus solely on the classroom context, 'involvement' means that the students interact and learn from each other without constant direction from the teacher. The teacher will instruct, i.e. transmit knowledge, but once this stage is completed, the teacher's primary responsibilities are to observe and facilitate while the students are working together in pairs or small groups, and to provide feedback upon completion of an activity. Combined with skillful organization and management, a methodology based on a learner-centered approach can be ideally suited to large classes; however, a learner-centered approach is not without its own risks.

The new roles and responsibilities for the students in a LC approach may be radically different from their previous language learning experiences, and their expectations of classroom methods. Therefore, it is imperative that a teacher ensures that students are prepared for, and feel comfortable in, a setting where a great deal of their learning comes from interaction with their peers, rather than interaction with their teacher.

### Learner Training

With intermediate-level students and above, a teacher could prepare the students for the new approach by explaining its principles and expectations. A more systematic strategy could also be taken by incorporating a 'learner training' (LT) component in the syllabus. Learner training materials, such as Ellis and Sinclair's text, *Learning To Learn English* (1989), are specifically designed to help students to become independent and autonomous in their learning so that they can,

among other things, function comfortably in a learner-centered atmosphere.

Regrettably, these options are not as readily implementable with students at the beginning or elementary levels. Published LT materials are written for intermediate-level students because of the conviction that students should have the English language proficiency to do the training activities in the target language, and sufficient second language learning experience to draw on in order to benefit from learner training. If a teacher is bilingual, Japanese could be used in the orientation process, but most native English-speaking teachers do not have the required Japanese proficiency to take this route (even if one had no objections to the use of the students' native language in class). In spite of these and other obstacles, there is another alternative which teachers can utilize to prepare students for a learner-centered approach.

'Embedded' learner training, where specifically designed materials and tasks elicit certain behavior and learning strategies without making direct reference to the purpose or value of the training, can be a viable means of reaching low-level students. An obvious advantage of the embedded approach is that since it is based on the principle of an avoidance of explicit discussion of training objectives, low-level English proficiency does not present a problem. It also allows a teacher to integrate language learning and learner training. The following example can illustrate how embedded learner training can be used to accustom students to the demands and responsibilities of a learner-centered classroom while concurrently contributing to the language acquisition process.

Since the development of spoken skills is the primary objective of English conversation classes, student interaction and cooperation are important behaviorial elements in the classroom. Since the amount of time for student-teacher interaction is severely limited in large classes, it is especially important that the students are willing and able to work

together. Once again, most first-year university students would likely be unaccustomed to this type of learning. Pair or small-group work, which are common features in communicative language teaching methodology, do not automatically lead to interaction and cooperation. If the students don't have sufficient input or are not clear about what is expected of them, they may simply sit together in pairs or small groups, and do nothing until the teacher comes around to them. On the other hand, by designing activities and tasks, such as problem-solving tasks, which intrinsically give the students the motivation and framework to begin, and the language input to work without constant reference to the teacher, learning and training objectives can be achieved.

## Guidelines For Task Selection and Design

The implementation of a teaching strategy based on embedded training relies on appropriate activities which reflect the training goals the teacher has chosen. For first-year students, a realistically attainable goal is the development of the students' interaction and cooperation skills in the classroom. Information-gap and problem-solving activities and tasks are well suited to this training goal ; however, it is important to keep two principles in mind when selecting and designing a training activity : it must be at the appropriate language level for the students, and it must take their affective disposition into account.

Recent work on task design and evaluation by Nunan (1989), Candlin (1987) and Wright (1987) provide valuable guidelines for task selection. They point out that any task has a cognitive aspect and an affective aspect, and the difficulty of a task can be determined by the demands the task makes in these aspects. Wright states that a task may be cognitively too difficult if it is beyond the aptitude (language and background knowledge or experience needed) of the individual, or if it is too demanding of a learner's emotional involvement. Nunan maintains that "... activities can be graded according to the cognitive and performance demands made upon the learner." (1989, 118)

Therefore, when one selects or designs activities to meet embedded training goals, one must thoroughly evaluate the cognitive, emotional and performance demands inherent in the activity. Losing sight of the overall picture is an easy thing to do, and an activity which superficially looks ideal may, in fact, have a 'hidden' feature which can cause problems and even outright failure. For example, let us assume that a teacher wants an activity to contribute to the development of interaction and cooperation skills in small-group work. Teacher resource texts offer numerous tasks and activities designed for small-group work, and many of these activites require the students to talk about themselves and ask other group members personal information. When considering this vast array of choices, a teacher must be certain that the activity is not so linguistically demanding, such as a topic requiring the use of mixed conditionals, or emotionally threatening or embarrassing that the students feel overwhelmed or alienated.

## Conclusion

In one sense, large and small English conversation classes are exactly alike. In either case, a teacher must make instructional, organizational and managerial decisions to suit the setting and the needs and personalities of the students. Though a teacher's task may often be more complex with large classes than with small classes, the potential for achieving the same learning objectives can be realized with both types of classes.

On the other hand, class numbers often influence the working patterns and atmosphere in the classroom, so it can be problematic if one attempts to employ the same procedures used in a class of 15 with a large class of 50. Different decisions and teaching strategies are often required.

The teaching strategy proposed in this paper is based on a belief in the suitability of a learner-centered approach to large classes. Since this type of approach is likely to be new to most first-year university

students, embedded learner training is suggested as a means of enabling the students to function, and feel comfortable in a learner-centered, interactive classroom.

## References

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